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CULTURAL CONTEXT AND LEARNING

Abstract

This study examines English learners in the United Arab Emirates in terms of their attitudes and motivation. Through a two-phased study that adopts both qualitative and quantitative approaches, this paper explores the correlation between students' socio-cultural values and their learning and eventual success.

Key words

attitude, culture, extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, language learning

Today one-fourth of the world population speaks English to some level of competency. There are more non-native speakers of English than those who use it as their first language. English has become the language the most in use on the Internet as well as in scientific writing and global business. Also the entertainment in English is the most popular. This status has encouraged non-English speaking world to learn and use the language. The United Arab Emirates is no exception, and English language education and entertainment are both widely spread in the country. Founded in 1971, this young nation has exhibited an unmatched level and speed of progress over the span of 4 decades. The UAE has made a remarkable progress in all areas of commerce and urban planning. In fact, the UAE is one of the most important commercial centres in the Middle East, which houses representative offices of many global companies. It is also witnessing a substantial construction boom and a flourishing tourism industry that brings millions of visitors to the country every year.

While achieving economic success, the UAE has also made much progress in reforming the education system. The government provides free education in all levels from elementary to tertiary. English is taught as a subject in elementary and secondary schools, and almost all higher education institutions use this language as the medium of instruction. Additionally, fluency in both spoken and written English is a requirement for most employment opportunities. Higher education and English language proficiency contribute to students' future employment and status and it further helps the nation's development and progress. Furthermore, the large number of expats and foreign workers makes English the main language of communication at the workplace as well as in many social interactions. As in many parts of the world, entertainment in English is widespread in the UAE. Entertainment, specifically music and movies, enjoys both popularity and offers financial gain. In fact, the majority of movies shown in the UAE theatres are Hollywood productions, whose impact can also be seen in the local film production. The music scene also offers a considerable number of well-attended musical events that bring highly paid world pop-stars from English-speaking countries. In fact, the UAE has its own music scene with production companies, bands and groups composing and singing in English.

Although entertainment in English is common and appreciated, it is English education that is most in demand by the authorities as well as the people in the UAE. Considering the enormous amount of exposure young Emiratis have to English, it appears logical to assume that the Emiratis have developed a positive

attitude towards the language and this attitude, in turn, is instrumental in learning the language. Krashen¹ in his Affective Factors Hypothesis listed a positive attitude towards the target language (English) and its culture as an important factor for successful language learning. In addition, the acculturation model² suggested that a desire for integrating into the target language culture and having less distance with respect to its speakers is necessary for learning English.

To explore these notions among UAE learners, a two-part study has been conducted. The first part of the study was sponsored by the British Council in 2011. This part examined students' attitude towards English in education as well as in entertainment with a focus on both music and movies. The second part of the study is aimed at examining students' motivation over the course of three semesters.

GENERAL METHODOLOGY

First part: Quantitative study

A survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire which was distributed among 700 female and male UAE national students aged 18-26. The number of male and female participants was approximately the same, as 90% of the respondents were male and 93% were female. The predominant age range was between 18 and 21, with only a small percentage of respondents aged between 21 and 26.

The questionnaire contained ten questions and was made available electronically through the Survey Monkey. Although the electronic survey was in English, Arabic translation was also provided. The first four questions were concerned with students' age, gender, level of education and their English language proficiency. The more detailed questions inquired about the respondents' perception of English in education and entertainment while focusing on cultural aspects that are significant to the UAE society and life. (For survey questions, see the appendix).

¹ S. D. Krashen, *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, New York 1988, pp. 1-154.

² J.L. Schumann, The relationship of pidginization, creolization, and Decreolization to second language acquisition. *Language learning* 28, 1978, pp. 367-379.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

According to the survey, 57% of the participants were new to higher education and were mostly studying in foundation programs to improve their language skills. The remaining 43% were either students working towards a bachelor’s degree or others who had already completed their degree programs. A considerable majority, however, studied in institutions where English was the medium of instruction.

When asked about their view of their language abilities, 54.6% of respondents considered their language abilities “good”, 12% thought their language skills were “very good” and 24.6% felt their English was “ok”. Only 2.6% expressed dissatisfaction with their language competence and considered their English “weak”.

Students who had studied English in government or public schools were twice as numerous as those who studied in private schools. A small percentage, less than 10%, stated that they had learned English in private institutions such as the British Council. Travelling to other countries, watching movies and films, as well as interacting with non-UAE relatives, have also been cited as the sources from where they received help with their English skills.

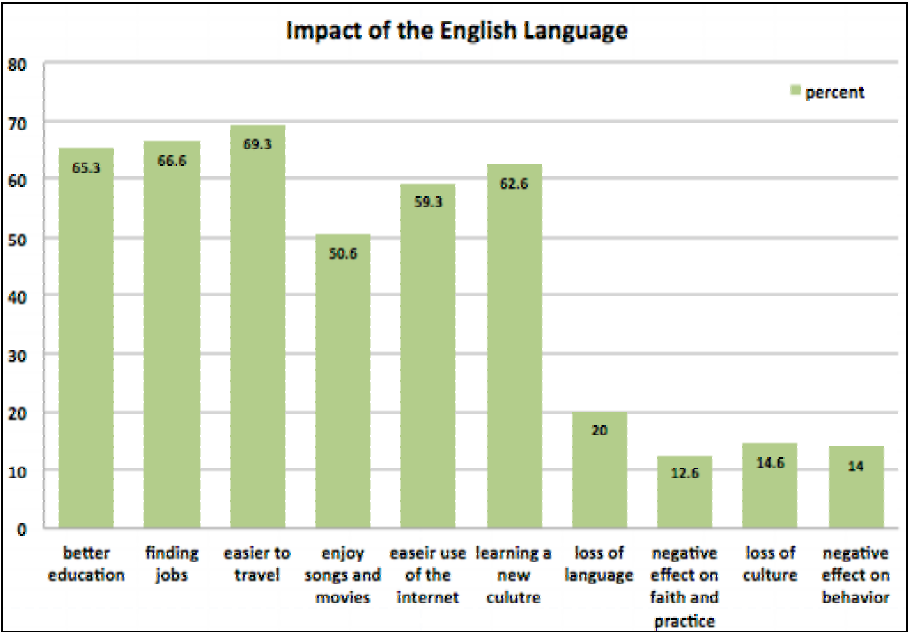


Chart A

As seen in Chart A, survey results showed that about 65% of respondents believed that learning English had a positive impact on a person's life in terms of providing access to better education, finding better jobs, facilitating travel, enjoying songs and movies in English, and better and easier use of the Internet. English was also considered as an important instrument for learning about other cultures and traditions.

However, about 20% of respondents believed that learning English could lead to loss of local culture and language and negatively affect their religious practices engendering undesired behavior.

In the case of entertainment, as shown in Chart B, the results also revealed that the most popular activities among the students were using the Internet to chat, access social media, surf, and play online games. Students visited both Arabic and English sites. The other two very popular activities were spending time with friends and watching movies. Helping family, listening to music, talking and sending messages were also among activities many respondents selected.

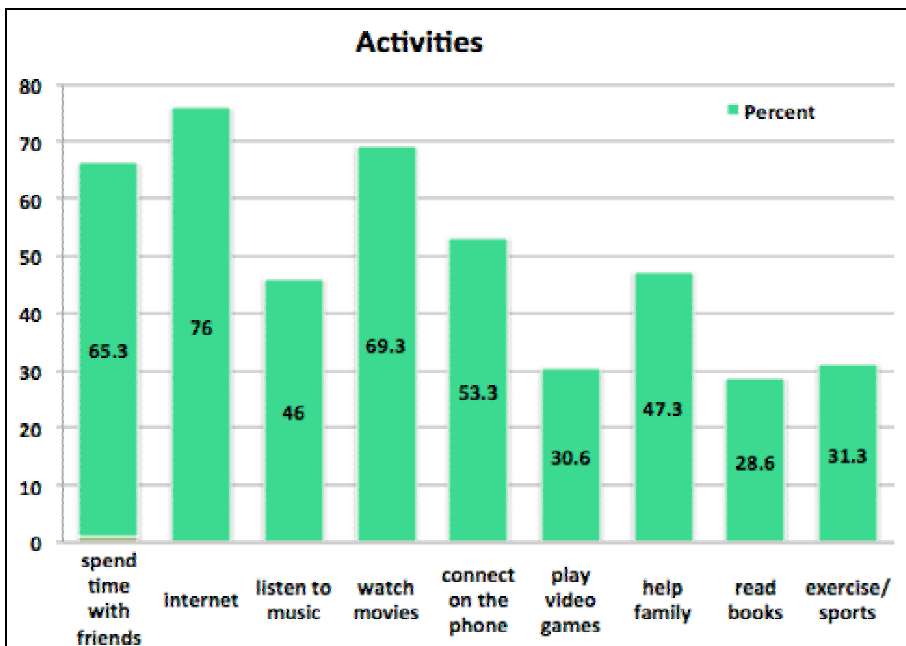


Chart B

In regard to movies, respondents showed a clear preference for movies in English. The majority stated that they watched English films, whereas only 36% said that they “sometimes” watched Arabic films. Approximately 26% stated that “once in a while” they watched movies in other languages. However, in contrast to films and movies, Arabic music was more popular than non-Arabic music. The majority of respondents listened to Arabic music either from the Gulf region or other Arab nations.

As seen in Charts C and D, most respondents believed that music and films in English improved their knowledge of English (72%), helped with their studies (47.3%) and taught them new things (64%). The entertainment in English also showed the importance of helping others (44%). The positive impact on relationship with friends and fostering a desire for modernity and better life was not as significant. However, most respondents highlighted the negative impact of these forms of entertainment on some aspects of the Emirati culture and language.

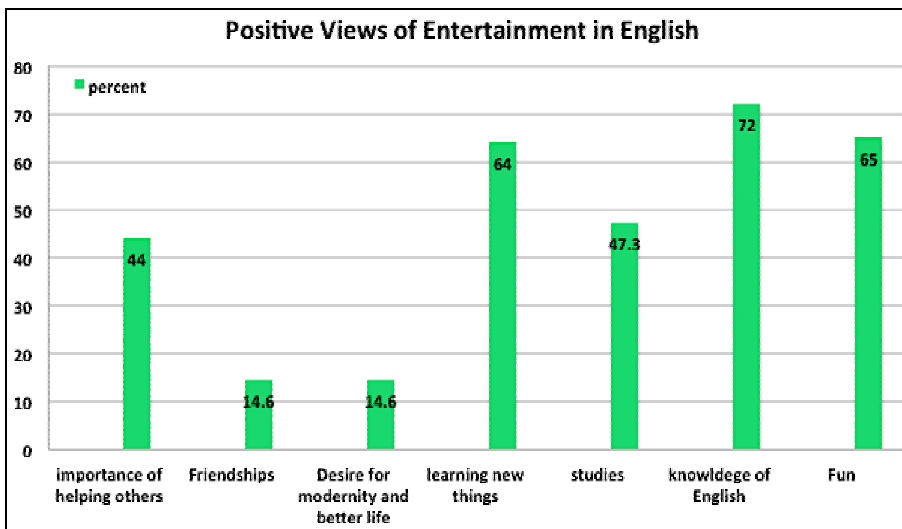


Chart C

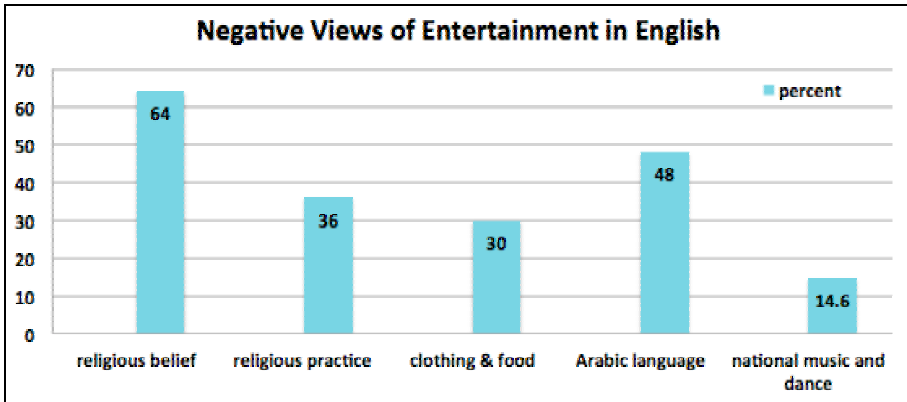


Chart D

The survey results, as seen in Chart D, showed that a strong majority of survey participants believed that music and movies in English have mostly negative impact on their religious beliefs and practices. Combined, 100% of respondents believe that music and films in English have a negative effect on their religious beliefs and practice. Almost half of the respondents stated that the entertainment in English negatively influenced their language. Adverse effects on clothing, food, national music and dance were also noted. In short, as Carlsson³ put it, they believed that entertainment in English represented “speed, power, girls and wealth” and values which were in contradiction with their beliefs. This attitude is reiterated by Anwar Mohammed Al Marrie⁴, an Emirati student at Zayed University, who believed that

Being exposed to Western media and entertainment does weaken Arab identity among Emiratis as they are losing their heritage and replacing traditional knowledge with a new one flashed on the shiny screens.

When asked about parents’ views, responses were also mixed. Almost all participants expressed some form of discontent on the part of parents with regard to their sons and daughters watching films and listening to music in English. A small percentage even mentioned that parents were not aware of what they watched or listened to. Also, by taking a closer look at the survey results, a conflicting point could be inferred. Although negative opinions of

³ S.E. Carlsson, Audiovisual Poetry or commercial Salad of images: Perspective on Music Video Analysis, *Journal of the Finnish society of Ethnomusicology* 2 (1), 1999, pp. 115-133.

⁴ A. Mohammad Al Marri, The Effects of the Foreign Entertainment on Emirati Identity and Culture, Paper written for the English composition III course, Zayed University, Dubai 2010.

movies in English were clearly indicated, the survey respondents, undoubtedly, favored watching movies, especially English films!

The survey results confirmed that UAE nationals, parents and students alike, value and encourage English education. They believe that English plays an important role in individual success and the nation's development. However, in spite of the fact that entertainment in English is a considerable source of learning, there is a real concern about the cultural influences of the Western entertainment on UAE youth. These views have led to an important question regarding the extent and degree of impact that negative attitudes toward English and the culture it projects have on learners' motivation and their ability to learn English. Dornyei⁵ in his book "Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom" discusses the affective factors including learners' views and suggests that there is a direct link between student's attitude and motivation and their desire to learn. This validates the aforementioned affective factors by Krashen. Also, given the negative views expressed by the respondents in this study, it can be concluded that Emirati students had no desire to acculturate and be part of the target language community the way Schumann⁶ deemed necessary for effective language learning. This means that Emirati students cannot be successful language learners. However, the deduction may not be accurate as many Emirati students have successfully learned English and completed their studies despite their professed negative views.

To explore the dichotomy, the second stage of the study was designed.

Second Part: Qualitative Study

This part included a longitudinal qualitative study in which 25 (mostly female) students were observed over a period of three semesters. This study set out to explore the students' attitudes, motivation and their eventual success as language learners.

The selected students had varying degrees of language proficiency. They all were studying their credited general education courses at a university where English was the medium of instruction. Six students, coming from private schools, already had advanced language skills. Other participants who had studied in public high schools, completed the foundation program, and had acquired varying degrees of proficiency. In the second group, some appeared to adhere strictly to their religious practices and cultural norms.

⁵ Z. Dornyei, *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*, Cambridge 2001, p. 22.

⁶ J.L. Schumann, *The relationship*, pp. 367-379.

Students' work and classroom participation were observed and recorded. Also informal interviews were held at 3-week intervals. The interviews focused on students' progress and approach towards English and their studies as well as their attitudes and cultural dispositions. The observations and interviews revealed that the students who had more exposure to English and associated Western culture usually came from more affluent backgrounds and showed more flexible attitudes towards the culture English language imparts. Most female students in this group demonstrated more adaptability towards Western clothing and did not sternly follow traditional and religious practices. However, a few female participants strictly adhered to their cultural norms. This was evident by the way they dressed and covered their faces in the presence of the opposite gender. In general, all students in this group expressed strong attachment to traditional values of their society and culture.

As shown in the first stage of the study, the second favorite pastime activity among UAE youth was watching movies in English. When asked about their attraction towards Hollywood movies, the responses varied. Some reacted by laughing lightly and others underlined that, "these movies are fun", "we learn from them" and "they are interesting stories." However, when the impact of movies was mentioned, the same group explicitly expressed their objection to the culturally taboo subjects such as sex and gender relationships depicted in the English-language entertainment. From their responses, it appeared that despite the attraction they felt for the movies in English, they were fully conscious of the cultural differences and expressed concern. Although actions and beliefs seemed incongruent, their statements indicated a clear cultural standard of which the observees were aware.

As students progressed from semester to semester, their success was measured through their performance in their English composition courses. Overall grades were an average of students' performance in the course which included their classroom participation, performance in assignments, their efforts in achieving improvement, their progress in writing, speaking and critical thinking skills. Their attitudes and cultural views were also noted through interviews and observations.

Throughout the three semesters of observation, the students improved, to varying degrees. It was evident that some enjoyed their progress and were pleased with their learning. Many had goals for the future and were determined to get involved in business, IT, politics, arts and media. They had various reasons which included helping family, contributing to their society and their own personal desire for a better employment and future. They had also

varying views of the culture of English as some felt more distanced than others. Some observees appeared more receptive to Western culture judging by their reactions, clothing and behavior that did not follow tradition, unlike others, who displayed more respect for their cultural norms. These differences did not seem to have a direct effect on their performance and success.

Given the negative views towards the culture projected by the English language, it was necessary to examine learners' motivation as it is a vital factor in language learning. Research points at two major types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic. In classical terms, intrinsic motivation occurs when there are internal and personal goals and when the learning process is enjoyable. However, extrinsic motivation refers to the impetus to act as a result of an independent external outcome or one which has an instrumental value. For example, when students study hard to satisfy their parents, their motivation is classified as extrinsic⁷. These two types of motivation have been defined and interpreted in various ways, but many studies on motivation agree that for successful language learning, learners should be intrinsically motivated. Also, learners who have individualistic approach aimed at achieving personal goals are more successful language learners than those who come from collective cultures where they follow their cultural norms and principles⁸ Engin and McKeown in their article "Cultural Influences on Motivational Issues in Students and Their Goals for Studying at University" state that Emirati students value their cultural norms more than their individual goals and that they are motivated more extrinsically than intrinsically. "What may be specific to this culture and context is the importance of family and society as a motivator. Students want to «prove themselves» and to help develop Emirati society, and have status in the society"⁹. This has also been evident in the current study. The survey respondents and observees expressed strong loyalty towards their culture and social values.

Observation of the students' success over three semesters revealed that extrinsic motivation and collective approach may not be as ineffective as it is perceived. Also, there may be more than one type of motivation in play. In fact, the three most successful students in this study were more traditional

⁷ R., D. Ryan, L. Edward, *Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions*, *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25, 2000, pp. 54-67.

⁸ M. Engin, K. McKeown, *Cultural influences on motivational issues in students and their goals for studying at university*, *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives* 9-1, 2012, pp. 1-15.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

than the rest and they appeared to be more devoted to their social and traditional values. At the beginning of the study, these three students were observed as being very reserved, with weaker language skills. However, they worked hard, showed enthusiasm and improved their language skills and grades by the end of this study in the third semester. They had clear goals for their future studies and were very pleased with their progress. At the same time, the family, social and cultural values had not diminished. This showed that loyalty for one's culture is not necessarily a hindrance to learning. Also, observations revealed that a combination of motivations was possible. The students in this study expressed their desire to study and learn English for personal achievement. They also enjoyed learning and at the same time worked hard towards goals that were approved by their family and society. Therefore, both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations were present. This indicates that perhaps, motivation and orientation should be viewed in cultural and social contexts. "Different cultures attach different meanings to achievement and (many in these cultures) are motivated to achieve for different reasons, have different goals for achievement and go about achieving their goals in different ways"¹⁰.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study confirm that although English language has mostly been viewed as helpful and instrumental in the personal and financial development of individuals in the Emirates, the cultural impact of music and movies originating from the English-speaking world has been perceived as less than desirable. The results of this study suggest that it is not the English language that many UAE youth have a negative view of, but the cultural messages that are naturally embedded in music and movies and may also be found in texts and learning tools that evoke mixed reaction. These messages are deemed to be in conflict with recipients' belief system and their traditions and norms. It should be noted that Emiratis are not the only nation that feel protective of their national identity and culture. Many nations around the globe have the same approach towards "foreign" entertainment. For example, France, although a Western nation, has the same reservations.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 2.

Moreover, studies on language learning state that a positive view and attitude toward the language and its culture is a precursor to successful learning. Also, it is suggested that learners who are intrinsically motivated and have individualist approach are more successful in language learning, but many Emirati students have extrinsic motivation and come from a collectivist culture, which would mean that they cannot learn English effectively. The current study, however, shows that despite their collectivist approach and extrinsic motivation, Emirati students could, in fact, be successful English learners. Additionally, we can see that learners can have multiple motivations. One type of motivation does not necessarily exclude the other. In short, it is possible for learners to remain attached to their cultures and traditions and achieve success. It is possible for learners to have a collectivist approach, be extrinsically and/or intrinsically motivated and be successful language learners. Perhaps the desire for learning and success should be examined differently in different contexts.

APPENDIX: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Please indicate your gender and age.

18-21

22-27

Male

☐
☐

Female

☐
☐

2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

High school student

High school graduate

University/college student

University/college graduate

3. How do you rate your knowledge of the English language?

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

Very good

Good

OK

Weak

4. Where have you learned English?

☐

Private primary and/or middle school

- ☐ Private High school
- ☐ Private University
- ☐ Government/public primary and/or middle school
- ☐ Government/public High school
- ☐ Government/national University
- ☐ Language institute

Other (please specify) | _____

5. How can learning English affect a person's life?

- ☐ Provides better access to education
- ☐ Facilitates better job opportunities
- ☐ Makes it easier to travel
- ☐ Provides chance to enjoy movies and music in English
- ☐ Makes it easier to use the internet
- ☐ Can be key to learning a new culture
- ☐ Negatively affects the use of Arabic
- ☐ Negatively affects the practice of religion
- ☐ Causes culture loss
- ☐ Can lead to bad behaviour

Other (please specify)

| _____

6. Which of the following activities do you usually do in your spare time?

- ☐ Spend time with friends
- ☐ Use the internet (surf, chat, play online games, etc)
- ☐ Listen to music
- ☐ Watch movies
- ☐ Talk on the phone or send text messages
- ☐ Play video games
- ☐ Help my family
- ☐ Read books



Exercise and sport

Other (please specify)

7. Do you watch movies or TV shows? If so, please specify the language of movies and how often you watch them? If you do not watch movies or TV shows, please select N/A.

rarely

once in a while

sometimes

often

N/A

Arabic

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

Hindi

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

English

☐

☐

☐



French



Other (please specify)

8. Do you listen to music? If so, please choose and rate the type of music you listen to. If you do not listen to music, please select N/A.

- rarely
- sometimes
- often
- mostly
- N/A

Arabic (UAE and other Gulf music)



)

Arabic (outside of Gulf region)



English

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

Hindi

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

Iranian/Persian

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

Spanish

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

Other (please specify)

9. How do you think music and movies/shows in English influence the people in your country?

negative effect

no effect

positive effect

Islamic belief



Religious practice



Clothing and food



Arabic language



Poetry and storytelling



Importance of money



Importance of
Helping others



Job and status



History



Respect for parents and family



Marriage



Relationship with spouse



View on Justice



Relationship with friends



Desire for modernity and better life



Learning new things



National music and dance



Type of entertainment

☐
☐
☐

Use of time

☐
☐
☐

Studies

☐
☐
☐

Knowledge of English

☐
☐
☐

Other (please specify) | _____

10. What do your parents think of the movies you watch or the music you listen to?

☐
☐
☐
☐

They approve.

They do not mind.

They do not know what I am watching or listening to!

They do not approve.

Why?

| _____

Summary

Minoo Asdjodi

KONTEKST KULTUROWY A UCZENIE SIĘ

Streszczenie

Według badań dotyczących postawy i motywacji uczących się, podejście zorientowane na jednostkę i motywowanie wewnętrzne są kluczem do efektywnej nauki języków. Niemniej, poprzez zastosowanie metod jakościowych i ilościowych, niniejsze badanie pokazuje że u uczących się występują różne rodzaje motywacji stymulujące naukę, zarówno wewnętrzne jak i zewnętrzne. Co więcej, w przeciwieństwie do ogólnie przyjętych założeń, nawiązanie bliskiej więzi z kulturą języka docelowego, nie jest konieczne, aby efektywnie się go uczyć.

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